

The Impact of Partner Migration on Female Labor Force Participation in a New Sending Region in Mexico

Background and Theory

Emigrants from Mexico are predominantly married men. They travel abroad in search of seasonal or long-term employment that will provide income for their households in Mexico. Family reunification abroad comes later, if at all, leaving women as *de facto* household and family heads in their partners' absence. The predominance of male migration from Mexico is based not only on historical labor recruitment practices and U.S. immigration policy, but also on social norms and traditional family ideals that construct men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Women in Mexico acquire more household decision-making power in their partner's absence, with implications for their participation in the formal labor market (Fernandez 1998; Kanaiaupuni 2000). Studies that consider the effect of migration on non-migrant family members in Mexico focus largely on the impact of remittances. Few of these studies challenge classical economic assumptions about intrahousehold dynamics. This research investigates the household structure of women with migrant partners and seeks to determine the impact of partner absenteeism on female labor force participation in rural areas of southeastern Mexico.

Recently, a number of national-level investigations have examined the relationship between remittances and labor force participation in Mexico (Hanson 2007; Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2006; Cox-Edwards and Rodriguez-Oreggia 2009; Airola 2008). The authors have found neutral or negative effects, particularly for the labor market participation of women. These findings are consistent with classical economic theory. As remittance income reduces the opportunity cost of non-income generating activities, reduced labor market participation is expected. Female labor force participation in rural Mexico, however, cannot be modelled based on classical assumptions. Despite similar levels of human capital endowments, men have much higher labor force participation rates than their female peers in rural Mexico (Pagan and Sanchez 2000). In 2010, only 20 percent of working age rural women were active in the Mexican labor force compared to 75 percent of men¹². Local gender norms designate women as reproducers and serve as supply- and demand-side barriers to female labor force participation. Pagan and Sanchez (2000) have identified a number of structural factors influencing female labor force participation in rural Mexico. In addition to labor legislation, trade union practices, and employer preferences, the authors identify within-family gender barriers as a fundamental source of low female labor force participation.

Bargaining models posit that individual members pursue their own interest given their relative bargaining positions inside the household. Bargaining is mediated by an "implicit contract" model in which the family is governed by culturally determined expectations for each member's position and obligations within the household (Zeitlin, Megawangi, Kramer, Colletta, Babatunde, and Garman 1995). Studies concerned with the effects of emigration have focused primarily on the traditional sending states of west-central Mexico. The culture of migration in this region strongly influences household decisions on education, labor and production. Migration is a rite of passage to adulthood for young men, and women are expected to endure loneliness and increased responsibility at home in exchange for the material

¹ The Mexican National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics defines rural as localities with few than 2,500 residents. I will use this definition throughout my analysis.

² Statistics derived using the IPUMS-International microdata sample of 2010 census of Mexico.

benefits and improved social status associated with remittances (Kandell and Massey 2002). In high-emigration communities, migration culture reinforces traditional divisions of labor and cultural gender norms. Male migrants are considered household heads, even in their absence. Changes in bargaining power of non-migrant household members as a result of migration are precluded by migrant culture norms that reinforce traditional gender roles. In recent years, new sending communities have emerged in southeastern Mexico. During the 1990s, this region, made up of the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Yucatán, and Veracruz, accounted for less than two percent of emigration to the United States. By 2005, 13 percent of U.S.-bound emigrants departed from this region.³ Rapid increases in emigration in this region mean households are not necessarily bound by migration-culture constraints that govern historical sending regions. Changes in household structure as a result of migration may give women in this region an opportunity to challenge the cultural norms that influence their bargaining position within the household.

Data and Methods

This paper will use microdata from the 10 percent sample of 2010 Population and Housing Census of Mexico produced by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics and available from the IPUMS-International project of the Minnesota Population Center. The 2010 Census of Mexico collected information on, among other topics, marital status and fertility history; international migration of household members; sources of household income, including remittance income; the socio-demographic composition of the household; and educational attainment and labor force participation of household members. This information, as well as household interrelationship variables constructed by IPUMS-International, will be used to examine the household structure and labor force participation of women with migrant partners.

The analysis will focus on a subsample of married or partnered working-age (15-64 years) women in rural localities in Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatán. To account for systematic differences in individual and household characteristics that might influence a couple's decision to separate for migration, I will perform propensity score matching to pair women who with migrant partners with other women who are likely to have migrant partners but do not (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1983, 1984; Austin 2011). Informed by similar analyses by Cox-Edwards and Rodriguez-Oreggia (2009), I will use a probit regression model to estimate the probability of having a migrant partner as a function of individual and household characteristics, rank and match women based on this score, and examine difference in labor force participation across the groups.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary analyses reveal large, significant differences in the labor force participation of women with international migrant partners. Table 2 reports labor force participation rates for women with migrant partners. On average, women with absentee migrant partners are more than twice as likely to participate in the formal labor force as their peers with partners who are present in the household. Chi-square tests of independence confirm a significant relationship between having a migrant partner and labor force participation in every state (Table 2).

³ Estimates derived by Riosmena and Massey (2012) using data from the 2006 Mexican National Survey of Population Dynamics.

Table 2: Labor force participation by gender and migrant partner status

	% total population in labor force	% females ^a in labor force	% females ^a with migrant partners in labor force	Chi square statistics (migrant partner v. female population)
Campeche	49.5	19.1	48.6	78.95, p = 0.000
Chiapas	43.9	11.6	29.7	676.95, p = 0.000
Quintana Roo	44.6	13.1	32.6	58.24, p = 0.000
Tabasco	44.9	18.3	21.6	4.145, p = 0.042
Yucatán	45.3	13.8	14.1	3.076, p = 0.079
Weighted Region				
Average	44.8	14.2	29.0	549.195, p = 0.000
Mexico	46.0	17.3	17.0	9.3, p = 0.002

^aMarried or partnered females aged 15 to 64

Initial probit specifications show a significant positive effect of partner migration on labor force participation when education, household income, number and ages of children, and household composition are controlled for. These initial analyses also reveal a higher likelihood of labor force participation for household heads. This is in line with findings by Wendy Cunningham (2001) that suggest that household role has significant implications for labor force participation.

The results of this study will offer insight into the shifting gender roles and intrahousehold labor allocation of households separated by migration in a new emigration region.

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